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EARLY PROHIBITION PHASE IN TAMIL COUNTRY

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Abstract :

The word 'Prohibition' means forbidding by law the manufacture and sale of alcoholic liquors for use as beverage. Its aim is to abolish by law, what prohibitionists consider as an evil and pernicious to humanity. The prohibition contains various restrictions in respect of liquor, toddy, opium, cheras, denatured spirits, intoxicant or hemp. Historically speaking, the habit of drinking intoxicant leverages existed in India from time immemorial. The distillation of liquor was known to ancient India as early as Rig Vedic period. There were two kinds of drinks , '*Somapana*' and '*Surapana*, ' which were used by the Indo-Aryan settlers in India. Ramayana and Mahabharatha also mention the habit of drinking. The Sangam literature reveal that kings and poets drank various kinds of liquors. It is said that the invasion of Alexander during the Fourth Century



not only linked East to the West but also gave 'a definite stimulus to drink evil'. There were different kinds of drink and preparation but it was not made a source of revenue in India. But during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, ' liquor saloons' existed under the control of the State. Kautilya in his book, *Arthasastra*, described the *abkari* policy of the State. During the Muslim Rule a tax on spirituous liquor appeared among the list of taxes. But the British period witnessed a phenomenal growth of the drink evil. The influence of western civilization drove the Indian people, to a certain extent, for foreign liquor. From the beginning of the British Rule in India, the habit of drinking developed into a new dimension.

Key Words: Prohibition, liquor, Toddy, Sangam, Drinking, alcohol.

Sangam Period

During the *Sangam* period, drinking toddy was not unknown to the Tamils. Different kinds of toddy such as *mattu*, *madu*, *naravu*, *theral* and *topi*¹ were used during the *Sangam* period, and all these kinds of toddy were basically made from the juice of palm and coconut trees. *Mattu* came from honey. *Madu* was extracted from flowers like *illupai*.² Rice cooked in toddy was known as *naravu*. *Theral* was the distillate of toddy. *Topi* was extracted from paddy³ or fruits.⁴ Toddy was also derived from a coarse grain called *thinai*.⁵ Generally speaking, the toddy used in the *Sangam* age was derived from honey, rice, fruits, coconut, etc.

People of the *Sangam* age looked upon toddy as a kind of food.⁶ To promote intoxication or 'kick', the people who drank toddy also ate fruits like *kala*, *thudari* and *novel*.⁷ They also ate the flesh of tortoise and prawns.⁸ They were served toddy and the fried flesh of the male pig which had been fattened by being confined

in a pit and fed for many days on rice flour.⁹

Liquor kept for a long time was said to sting like a scorpion.¹⁰ People enjoyed drinking liquor that was at once sweet and stinging.¹¹ The biting taste of liquor is compared to the stinging of a snake.¹²

Toddy kept the consumer quite warm.¹³ People used to offer it to the stones they worshipped in honour of the dead.¹⁴ Toddy flowed like water'.¹⁵ "Toddy was spilt while people ran into sodden pools in which elephants played".¹⁶ From such references in the *Sangam* literature, it could be inferred that the habit of drinking toddy was widespread.¹⁷

Soldiers drank toddy to the extent possible and eyes red with the intoxicant, they plunged into battle.¹⁸ They used to drink while fighting on the battlefield. They celebrated their victories with drinking and merrymaking.¹⁹ Liquor, with quantities of rice, was consumed on the battlefield.²⁰

A philanthropist called Periyar of Porayar enjoyed himself drinking toddy.²¹ A chieftain called Pittam Kotran offered toddy to minstrels.²² When the king was seated on the throne, administering the affairs of state and offering prizes to the literati, he used to drink.²³ A king called Adhiyaman Poguttezhini offered a drink called *theral* to Porunan and his relations.²⁴ Athiyaman also gave toddy to a woman poet called Avvaiyar.²⁵ Thus women too used to drink. The Kuravas used to drink *madhu* and take part in a group dance called *Kuravai*.²⁶ Women used to serve drinks in fish-shaped gold vessels.²⁷ As a matter of fact, drinking habit was prevalent in the society of those days.

Toddy drawn from the coconut palm and palm toddy trees, was drunk by poor classes such as labourers, soldiers and wandering minstrels. Scented liquor manufactured from rice and the flowers of the *Thathaki* (*Buhinia Tomenrosa*) and fragrant substances, were used by the richer classes. Cool and fragrant wines brought by *Yavana* (or Greek) ships were the favourite drinks of the kings.²⁸

A poem refers to the cool and fragrant wine brought by the *Yavanas* in beautiful vessels, poured into gold cups held by damsels wearing bright bracelets, drunk by the king and his guests.²⁹

Delicious wine was imported from the land of the *Yavana* as a special and favourite drink of the kings who drank the clear liquid while they served crude liquor to guests.³⁰ Wine imported by *Yavanas* was in great demand even by others.³¹ Kumattu Kannanar, assuming the role of a minstrel, praised Imayavaramban Neduncheraladhan and called upon all to drink toddy and eat rice with chopped mutton and varieties of roasted chillies. Eating mutton was always accompanied by the drinking of toddy. The king ate and drank in the company of his guests and relatives and presided over a boisterous table.³²

Post-Sangam Period

This kind of drinking habit continued to prevail in Tamil Society in the post - *Sangam* period also. Even during the Pallava³³, Chola³⁴, Pandya, Vijayanagara and post - Vijayanagara period³⁵, the sources indicate the prevalence of drinking habit among the Tamils. For example, people in the Vijayanagar Period enjoyed drinking liquor freely on festive days like New Year, Deepavali and Holi. The Pandya Kings imported a lot of liquor.

Moral Restraints on Drinking Habits

In general, Tamils were fond of drinking. At the same time, some sections of the population considered it as an evil. However, there is no conclusive evidence in the *Sangam* literature to indicate any moral prohibition in the Sangham Period. But the post-*Sangam* literature like Thirukkural and Thirumandiram clearly condemn the drinking habit. Thiruvalluvar, the author of Thirukkural, condemns killing, lust, stealing, eating flesh and drinking liquor. He praised abstinence from meat eating and drinking as virtues to be emulated. He devotes ten verses to expose its evil and dissuades people from all such iniquity.³⁶ Likewise, Thirumoolar in his *Thirumandiram*, is very categorical about the evil and advises people to abstain from the habit.³⁷

Even the Siddhas of the later period, exhorted people to avoid drinking. For example, Badragiri Kaduvelli Chithar, Azhugani Chithar, and Madurai Valaisamy have spoken strongly against this addiction.³⁸

There is evidence to indicate, especially from the Pallava Period, that the popular Hindu legal codes of the North were in force in the Tamil Country. Hence, in this context it may not be irrelevant to quote Manu and other *Dharma Sastras* and *Sutras* regarding drinking habit. Manu (IX) 215) says, "Let the King instantly banish gamblers and sellers of spirituous liquor from the town". *Apastamba Sutra* says, "All intoxicating liquor is forbidden".³⁹

Not only the Hindus but also the Buddhists and the Jains who had a sizeable following in the Tamil Country, condemned this evil habit as a vice to be scrupulously avoided. In fact, one of the five Buddhist commandments is "Ye shall drink no intoxicating drink".⁴⁰

No wonder W.E. Johnson wrote, "There is not a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain or Sikh in the world but feels that, according to his religion, alcoholic drink is an evil. No member of any of these religious bodies can drink intoxicants without being disloyal to his religion".⁴¹

Even Islam and Christianity, which converted a sizeable section of the Tamils to embrace their respective religions, also condemn drinking as an evil. For example, the Koran says "intoxicants are nothing but an uncleanness and Satan's work. Shun them that you may prosper. Their harm is greater than their advantage". Christianity also advises its votaries to abstain from drinking.⁴²

Hence, drinking as an evil has been instilled in the minds of the people all along the way. However, all the above teachings embraced only some proportion of the people and others were slaves to the habit of liquor.

British Moral Tradition

For the British, alcohol and crime are intimately associated. The Chief Justice of England believed that "but for drink we might shut up nine out of every ten jails". Hence a judge of England said, "I do believe that nine-tenths of the crime committed in these countries is engendered in drinking houses".

Lord Richie, the then Home Secretary, was also of the view that eighty per cent of crime was due to alcohol. As F.C. Andrew Ivy rightly felt, "Alcohol is an important cause of poverty, parental and juvenile delinquency, divorce and crime, and the debasement of human dignity".⁴³

In fact, Christianity discourages only excessive consumption of liquor. In all churches, wine is required for ritual. In Anglican Churches, it is taken by the priest and the congregation and in Catholic Churches, it is required for the ritual of Mass and is taken by the priest alone. In Catholic institutions, the quantity of wine used is only about an ounce but in Anglican Churches, it is a little more than that. Without wine, the communion service cannot be held in Anglican Churches, or the ritual of Mass in Catholic institutions.⁴⁴ Though it was in small quantity, Christians have constant touch with liquor, which led to the war against prohibition.

Legal Restraint

Till the arrival of the British, none of the kings, whether the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, or the Vijayanagar or post Vijayanagar kings, introduced legislation prohibiting drinks. However, slender evidence left by foreign travellers during the Vijayanagar Period indicates that the people given to drinking were barred from naval service.⁴⁵ Tamil kings did not introduce prohibition and yet it appears that some of them did not miss the opportunity to derive income by taxing drinks. The earliest reference is that of the Pallava Kings who levied eighteen taxes, including taxes on palm and coconut trees. In addition, a separate tax was levied on extracting liquor from trees.⁴⁶ Likewise, there is evidence about the later Cholas who levied a tax called *Ealam Pootchi* on toddy tappers for extracting toddy from palm and coconut trees.⁴⁷ Such taxation measures of Tamil Kings are supported by *Manu Dharmasastra*, which says that levying taxes on liquor is the proper way of raising funds for governance.

To conclude, this trend leads to the speculation that maybe, the number of drunkards was small and hence the Tamil kings never thought of introducing prohibition legislation. Probably, the Tamil kings might have thought about moral restraints imposed by religion were sufficient to wean people away from this evil. Another reason could be the absence of a western-educated elite in pre-British Tamil Nadu. Modernisation and westernisation of Tamil education, and the birth of the Tamil educated elite in the later Nineteenth and the early Twentieth Centuries, resulted in the birth of the Prohibition Movement in Tamil Country.

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